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Violent Criminal Acts and Actors Revisited. Lonnie Athens

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greater tolerance and, at the same time, ensure the survival of a vibrant, pluralistic culture.

Lonnie Athens, *Violent Criminal Acts and Actors Revisited*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997. \$24.95 hardcover, \$14.95 papercover.

Although violent crime comprises only a small proportion of all criminal acts, it receives the most attention and has the most devastating consequences for its victims; it also has the most chilling effect on those who learn about it. For many, mindless violence is perplexing. Why do some people engage in the most brutal violence often for minimal gain? In an attempt to answer this question, criminologists have offered a plethora of explanations. These range from accounts that emphasize the role of individual psychopathology to those that stress the role of negative social and environmental conditions in the socialization of violent people.

This fascinating book introduces yet another element into criminological explanations of violent crime, namely the role of the subjective experiences of violent criminals. Insisting that criminologists should not only study violent acts but the feelings, meanings and explanations of violent actors themselves, Lonnie Athens reports on a twenty five year study of convicted violent criminals and the reasons they themselves give for their violent behavior. The book is replete with horrific but highly illustrative case studies which offer a very different interpretations of understanding criminal violence. Athens shows that an understanding of subjective meanings is critically important in the field. Since violent criminals range from the psychopathological to the ordinary, an interpretation of their careers more effectively informs understanding than explanations that utilize conventional explanatory theory.

This book will generate a great deal of discussion. In addition to his carefully documented interviews with offenders which richly illustrate the text, the author's own experience of undertaking the research makes for interesting reading. Particularly frightening is his account of how prison guards on one occasion deliberately left him alone with a dangerous offender who then attacked him. It seems that some of those who are entrusted with

the care and rehabilitation of the violent are themselves not averse to the condoning or even participating in such violence.

Peter Leonard, *Postmodern Welfare: Reconstructing an Emancipatory Project*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997. \$23.95 papercover.

In certain circles, postmodernism has nearly attained cult status. The term is now widely bandied about at conferences and in discussions about the human condition. However, it remains poorly defined and relatively few social workers who use it know what it means. Equally few understand its implications for social policy and social welfare. While postmodernism is lauded for being anti-positivist and for promoting identity politics, its relevance for the future of social welfare is poorly understood.

Peter Leonard bravely attempts to explain what postmodernism means for social policy and social work. Wading through jargon and rhetoric, he manages to reduce postmodernism to its basic elements and to interpret its meaning in ways that are comprehensible. Of course, many other commentaries on postmodernism have been published, and while some of these provide even more comprehensible explanations, Leonard's book is useful for its discussion on the implications of postmodernism for human well-being. Coming as he does from a Marxist persuasion, Leonard's account of the normative implications of postmodernism is not an entirely happy one. He clearly recognizes the inability of postmodernism to offer a viable alternative to the social democratic project which he and many other Marxists defended against the radical right's onslaught. But, like many others, he recognizes that social democracy is increasingly ineffective and unappealing to electorates, and that alternative paradigms are needed. While he suggests that postmodernism can provide a normative basis for reconstruction, his argument is not wholly convincing. Nevertheless, his attempt to harness the potential of popular social movements to engage in effective activism is an interesting one. It is one of the few coherent explications not only of how postmodernism can provide a normative basis for social welfare but of how activism can be kept alive in a world which is increasing indifferent to human suffering, social causes and collective action. It remains to be seen whether his ideas and